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ABSTRACT

This document offers "reciprocal questioning" as a technique that promotes active learning and that is a practical and powerful way to help students improve their reading comprehension. First, the technique is described in detail. Steps include selection of four to five paragraphs of text; preparation of 10-12 questions over the material, including factual questions and questions that require inference, application, and evaluation; introduction of the procedure; silent reading of the selection; student questioning of the teacher; and teacher questioning of the students. Suggestions are then offered on how to deal with the questions students ask, questions that are not stated clearly, do not follow logically from the reading, or extend beyond the material. This section includes recommendations for opening the opportunity for others in the class to become involved and for dealing with a difficult question the teacher cannot answer. Suggestions for teachers' questions include repeating the instructions, asking the same questions students asked, asking increasingly sophisticated questions, and knowing when to finish. (YLB)

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TECHNíQUES
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IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH RECIPROCAL QUESTIONING

By Deanna C. Martin and Robert Blanc

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All other things being equal, active learning produces longer lasting benefits than passive learning. As reading teachers, we realize that many of our lessons and assignments do not require the learner to be actively engaged. Workbook exercises can be completed by a student who is not actively involved in the material. Likewise, students can finish reading assignments with little attention to what they have been asked to do. Thus the advice to students that their comprehension will improve if they read more is not necessarily true. What is true is that their comprehension will improve if they are actively engaged in the reading process.

We offer "reciprocal questioning" as a technique which promotes active learning. Specifically, reciprocal questioning helps students 1) to become aware of the implicit as well as the explicit meanings of a passage, 2) to improve their analytic skills with respect to reading, 3) to improve their reasoning, and 4) to strengthen the questioning skills which are integral to comprehension. In short, we offer this active technique as a practical and powerful way to help students improve their reading comprehension.

Because active participation on the part of the learner usually implies active participation on the part of the teacher, and because this technique is unfamiliar to many teachers, we have taken the liberty of describing the technique in detail. Included, you will find suggestions on how to deal with the questions students ask and what kinds of questions to prepare for them. Because the technique requires a certain degree of improvisation and spontaneity, some may find it a bit "high-risk." For those who do, we recommend using the technique exactly as we have described it the first few times, and then alter or modify it in accordance with your personal preferences. Keep in mind that we want to encourage active participation by the students, and that encouragement of their questions is the best way to support their interaction with the material of the lesson.

Reciprocal questioning is adapted from Anthony V. Manzo, "The ReQuest Procedure," *Journal of Reading*, November, 1969.

Procedure

Select a brief but important section from the text or something related to their job which does not exceed 4-5 paragraphs.

Prepare in advance ten to twelve questions over the material, including factual questions directly from the passage and questions that require inference, application, and evaluation. Prepare at least one question that requires the respondent to make a prediction based on the material, e.g., "Where is the author going with this topic?" Additionally, ask at least one question that requires the student to relate what he or she has just read to something else previously discussed in class.

Introduce the procedure to the group by saying, "Here is a procedure I think will help you to improve your comprehension. We will read the selection together, silently. After we have read it, I will close my book. Then I will ask you to ask me questions about the material, the kinds of questions a teacher might ask to check a student's comprehension. After you have asked all the questions you can find, I will ask you to close your books while I ask you some questions."

After you have made sure they understand the directions, proceed. Pace your own reading slowly so that you do not finish before your students are through reading.

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What Happens When Students Ask Questions?

We have used this procedure in a wide range of classes, from junior high school to adults enrolled in professional schools. What follows are some of the things we have found to happen most often.

Students may not state their questions clearly. When there is ambiguity in the questions, ask for clarification. "Are you asking me . . . ?" By doing this, you help the student to become aware of ambiguity and to correct it. You also let the student know that when a teacher asks an ambiguous question, it is all right for them to ask for clarification.

Students' questions tell you how students are thinking. Students ask the kinds of questions they are comfortable with. For some, these will be limited to factual, detail-oriented questions. These are the students we particularly want to help, because it is likely that they are not sensitive to the subtlety of implied meanings. Our experience shows that students will alter their orientation to the material in response to the modeling of other students and the teacher. Specifically, as they hear how others think about the material, they begin to ask and answer more sophisticated questions. You will begin to see such changes after five or six sessions. It doesn't take long.

Students will ask the wrong question. Some questions may not follow logically from the reading. Such questions indicate mental confusion or misunderstanding of the author's intent. While you should always try to answer the questions, note that they cannot be answered from the material which was read. If you can't make a logical response, or if you don't understand the question, say so. Ask the student if he or she can tell you more about what they are thinking.

Students will ask questions which extend beyond the material. When students ask questions which require inference, synthesis, application, or evaluation, comment on it. "That question goes a bit beyond the information given and asks for an interpretation. That is a higher order question, and quite a challenging one." When you answer such a question, model your thinking for the student. "In the passage it said (this and this). From that, I would infer (this). Thus in answer to your question, I would say (this)." Through such an approach, you are complimenting the student who asked the question but not demeaning others. You also are encouraging others to try to ask questions of the same type. When you explain your thinking, you are modeling for students the way an effective thinker addresses a question when an exact answer isn't given in the material.

Students will ask difficult questions. When they do, and after you have answered to the best of your ability, you can turn to the class and ask, "Is there something I have left out?" This opens up the opportunity for others in the class to become involved.

You may not be able to answer a question. That is all right. It is important for students to see how a competent adult deals with not knowing an answer. (In fact, we suggest that you intentionally "miss" a question or two.) You may tell them what you do remember which relates to the question and then ask for help from the group. We urge you, however, not to ask the student to answer his or her own question. An important consideration in this procedure is that it be non-threatening to students.

What Happens When the Teacher Asks Questions?

Here are some of the things we keep in mind when it comes our turn to ask questions.

Begin by repeating the instructions. Instruct students to close their books or turn their papers over. Begin your questioning by asking a few questions that are clearly answered in the material. Questions which require students to recall specific facts, details, definitions or steps are good openers. As students indicate their willingness to respond, call on those you perceive to be the weakest. Praise their correct responses.

Ask students one or two of the same questions they asked you. When you ask the class the same question one of the students asked you, you can say, "I hope you don't mind. I think it is a good question and I want to use it, too." Thus the inventor of the question is encouraged. If the student is a weak student, that individual may feel more powerful both for having invented the question or for being able to answer it the second time it is asked.

Ask increasingly sophisticated questions. You may say, when you do, "I know the answer to this is not exactly in the selection, but let's see if you can figure it out from what we read."

There may be questions no one can answer. When that happens, you can take the responsibility. "I guess I asked the wrong question. What I had in mind was (this). How should I have asked the question?" This approach will ease the tension for both you and the students. Additionally, it allows students to see that even sophisticated questioners sometimes have difficulty framing appropriate questions.

How do you know when you are finished? There are two ways to know when you are finished. One is when interest lags. We recommend a 20 minute time limit for the procedure. The other is when you have led into the next class activity, which is the best way to end this phase of the lesson. We often set up our last question in such a way that it becomes the transition into what we have planned next.

Other Uses for Reciprocal Questioning

The same procedure can be used when tutoring an individual student. A class discussion or a film can be used as the basic material instead of a reading. A minimum of modifications is required for these adaptions.

What is so Good About Reciprocal Questioning?

Students get to watch teachers thinking, and the teachers tell the students how they are thinking as they do it. Students get to practice thinking in a non-threatening environment. Students get to learn from each other as well as from the teacher. Students make substantial gains in reasoning.

In summary, comprehension improves. Not just reading comprehension, but comprehension of what happens in other situations. The students learn how to analyze situations whether presented in print or in other forms.

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